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SUBJECT: OMAN ONLINE: FREE TRADE (AND FREE TAYBAH!)

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1B. MUSCAT 1278

Summary: The Omani Internet message board "al-Sablah" is the liveliest and most comprehensive Arabic-language forum for political and social discourse in the country, touching on issues and personalities rarely addressed in the conventional media. While not totally free, nor wholly reflective of Omani public opinion, this popular site nevertheless offers a worthwhile window into the hot topics and unvarnished views of the day. This edition of Oman Online contains the following topics:

- Taybah al-Ma'wali, Continued
- Completion Of Free Trade Agreement Negotiations
- Dual Citizenship
- His Majesty's Speech To The Majlis Oman
- More On Oman's New Ambassador To The United States

End summary.

This Topic Is Locked Up

12. An ongoing discussion (reftel B) regarding Taybah al-Ma'wali, an Omani woman imprisoned for criticizing senior officials and spreading false information, attracted over 5,600 hits and almost 100 responses. The resurgence in interest was triggered by a letter, written by Ms. al-Ma'wali and delivered to her brother, thanking al-Sablah members for their support during her incarceration. The members of the online forum overwhelmingly reaffirmed their solidarity with her, saying "There are hundreds of Omanis who have not forgotten you," and "We are behind you every step of the way, Taybah!"

13. Many participants renewed their calls for Ms. al-Ma'wali's release. One such individual hoped that, "On the occasion of Ramadan, we pray that the government will grant amnesty to Taybah and let her out of jail." Another argued, "The Sultan managed to pardon dozens of criminals earlier this year, so why does Taybah remain behind bars?" A related posting carried a link to the Paris-based Arab Commission on Human Rights, which criticized Ms. al-Ma'wali's detention.

The End Of FTA Negotiations

14. Despite significant press coverage, the October 3 announcement of the completion of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations -- hosted by the Ministry of Commerce & Industry -- failed to spark a wide-ranging discussion in al-Sablah. 43 members viewed the topic, with 8 responses thus far. One person commented, "I have concerns about this agreement; for example, will we have to follow Bahrain's example and get rid of the boycott on Israeli products?" Another claimed, "Only U.S. companies will benefit from this arrangement. Omani companies are simply too weak to compete with the big firms, and we will suffer economically."

15. A more level-headed contributor, realizing that the text of the agreement has not yet been released publicly, suggested "Let us wait for the actual details of the agreement before analyzing it." Still another referred to the upcoming Congressional scrutiny of the FTA, and wrote "I wonder when the agreement will be referred to the Majlis al-Shura for its consideration?"

Citizens Of The World

16. Al-Sablah members forayed briefly into the realm of immigration issues when one member posed the following question: "Can an Omani simultaneously hold an Omani passport and a U.S. passport?" The topic generated 259 hits and 6 responses. "This matter depends on the country's regulations," began one writer, "but I think you lose your Omani citizenship once another country accepts your application for naturalization." Another said, "I believe the prevailing law in Oman does not allow dual citizenship, yet I think there are many nationals who have more than one passport. Yet, they did not abandon their identity and their allegiance to the fatherland. I wish the government would

allow Omanis to retain their dual citizenship."

Speechless in the Sultanate

17. Sultan Qaboos' annual address to the Majlis Oman disappointed a majority of al-Sablah members who commented on it (335 hits and 18 responses). Before the October 1 speech, one hopeful citizen wrote, "Since this is the 35th anniversary of the Sultan's reign, we can expect a momentous speech in front of the Majlis." However, the perceived vagueness of the speech, not to mention its limited duration, left a few forum members with a bad taste in their mouth. "Where were the big decisions or big announcements? It was just some talk about human resources. The address was really too short," complained one observer. Another added, "It seems that this was a 1970s speech; they merely changed the date to 2005."

Gender Diplomacy, Revisited

18. The topic of Oman's new ambassador to the United States continued to pique the interest of visitors to the online message board. All told, the subject has received over 2,500 hits with 140 responses. As reported in reftel A, most of the responses have been congratulatory, lauding the appointment of a female to this important diplomatic post. However, a few observers took the opportunity to air grievances about the overall state of women in Oman. Sniped one member, "Where else in the world but Oman can a woman achieve 90% on her college examinations and still not get a job? Where else in the world but Oman can a woman be prevented from buying a plot of land?"

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